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Combining 'special' and 'inclusive' settings in the early years: Children's experiences of environments in a state of change

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Combining 'special' and 'inclusive' settings in the early years: Children's experiences of environments in a state of change

How are the children constructed in the different settings?

Abstract

It is not uncommon for young children in England identified with special educational needs to attend both mainstream/inclusive and special early childhood settings. Amid the national policy context of placing children at the centre of individually created packages of provision and parents at the centre of decision-making and a reality of a multi-track system of mainstream and special services, parents can negotiate such combined packages of provision in (Nind, Flewitt & Johnston, 2005). We reported at the 2005 BERA Conference on a small-scale questionnaire and interview study of how parents had arrived at the decision to combine both special and mainstream preschool settings, their expectations of this combination, and their experiences. An emerging theme from that data was that parents believed this combination offered 'the best of both worlds' for their children – which they felt neither inclusive nor special settings alone could provide.

The 2007 follow-up study, part of which is reported here, considers the experiences of three children with learning difficulties attending special and mainstream early years settings, with a particular focus on the ways in which they make meaning in these environments and at home. The study adopts an ethnographic case study approach, including visual methods of data collection. Video observations capture the multi-sensory, multimodal dynamism of children's meaning-making, and semi-structured and informal interviews with staff and parents reveal different constructions of particular events, children and needs. Data were collected on each child for a period of one week near the start of the Spring term 2007, and will be collected for a second week during the Summer term. Computer Aided Qualitative Data Analysis Software is being used to enhance the systematic, rigorous analysis of the complex qualitative data.

Adopting a social model of disability, the study is not concerned with deficits within children or within environments, but with how children act on and within the diverse social environments that may facilitate or hinder their active participation as members and learners. The approach treats the children as active meaning-makers in socio-historically situated dynamic contexts. A rich complicating contextual factor in the project is how the settings attended by the children are variously placed on a segregation-integration continuum. The study is revealing that the settings are often in complex transition as they attempt to provide for all needs within the context of current political drivers to move swiftly towards more fully inclusive provision. The findings therefore also offer a timely snapshot of a system of provision in a state of change.

The detailed, empirical evidence on how individual children respond to the varied communicative environments of home and the different settings is important for the evaluation of local and national policy and for parents facing decisions about whether or not to combine settings. Ultimately, we hope that the study findings will help to illuminate the ways in which the macro processes embodied in the organizational structures and practices of different settings impact upon the micro processes of children's everyday learning. This conference paper focuses one of four research questions addressed in the study: How are the children constructed in the different environments of home and two early years settings on the special-inclusive continuum.

Reference

Nind, M., Flewitt, R. & Johnston, B. (2005) Parents choosing to combine special and inclusive early years settings: the best of both worlds. Final Report for Mencap City Foundation. University of Southampton.

Introduction

Provision for children with special educational needs in the UK and across Europe can be placed along a segregation-integration continuum (Bayliss, 1997; Brusling and Pepin, 2003), or as Corbett (1997) argues somewhere in between exclusion and inclusion. In England government policy maintains that young children should be placed at the centre of individually created packages of provision (*Together from the Start*, DfES/DH, 2003; *SEN strategy* DfES, 2004b) with parents placed at the centre of decision-making (*Choice for Parents*, DfES, 2004a). Provision is shifting towards a comprehensive model and inclusive environments, staffed in integrated ways (educationalists, care staff, therapists), increasingly in the form of 'children's centres'. However, there is a legacy of other environments, and the 'choice' for many children and parents is between special or mainstream settings or settings somewhere on the journey towards a new shape and focus.

While research tells something of what parents of children with special educational needs want to make their decisions (see e.g. Lindsay and Dockrell, 2004; Nind and Flewitt, in press), little is known about how children experience different options (Donnegan, Ostrosky and Fowler, 1996). Studying the reality of combining different settings for young children themselves is complicated by the children's young age, their difficulties in learning and communicating, the state of flux of the environments in which they find themselves and the active transactional influence of individuals and environments. The children are active meaning-makers in socio-historically situated dynamic contexts - contexts in which the children are variously constructed by the actors within. Central to understanding the children's experiences is understanding these constructions of less powerful people (young children) by more powerful people (professionals/adults); they are key elements in the "profound human impulse to tell stories about the world as we see it" (Clough, 1995, p.126). Adopting a broadly social constructionist perspective (Slee, 1998) we can explore the ways in which the children are constructed, and their experiences interpreted, based on a mix of social values, historical legacies, structures and purposes.

Methods

Sample

The children were selected to meet the key criteria of:

- being four-year-olds
- having learning difficulties
- attending a combination of special and inclusive early years settings.

They were found using contacts from the earlier study (Nind et al, 2005) of parents choosing to combine special and inclusive settings for their children in the early years. The early years settings acted as gatekeepers to the parents and several potential families for the study were considered to be in too vulnerable a position to be approached. Moreover, changes in local policy and funding arrangements since this study meant that there were far fewer children combining settings than eighteen months previously. One local authority had opted to invest in resourced 'special inclusive' early years provision, which ultimately limited parents' choice to the one setting, which was often not local. There was also a move to limit funding so that parents could not choose to combine settings in the spirit of national policy. Child M's parents had made arrangements for her ahead of local policy changes and fought to retain provision based on the earlier agreement. She therefore attended a specially resourced provision and a genuinely local, ordinary village playgroup. Child H was attending both the specially resourced infant school nursery classroom on her statement, and the local opportunity group she had previously been attending. The combination was arrived at because the infant school had experienced difficulties in coping with H for five sessions. Child J presented an interesting situation as he attended five sessions at a specially resourced playgroup and also a Saturday morning session at a Sure Start Dad's Club provision, which was fully inclusive. Thus, instead of a simple selection of three children and three special settings and three inclusive ones the early years environments were as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: The settings

CHILD M	CHILD H	CHILD J
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SETTING 1	SETTING 1	SETTING 1
Suburban Sure Start Children's Centre	Local Smalltown Opportunity Group	Special Inclusive Playgroup
<i>(Special-)Inclusive in name, Special in nature</i>	<i>Special in name, Special in nature</i>	<i>(Special-)Inclusive in name, Integration in nature</i>
SETTING 2	SETTING 2	SETTING 2
Village Playgroup	Distant Smalltown Infant School	Sure Start Dad's Club
<i>Inclusive in name, Inclusive in nature</i>	<i>(Special-)Inclusive in name, Locational/social integration in nature</i>	<i>Inclusive in name, Inclusive in nature</i>

The distinction made between the special/inclusive status of the setting in name and in nature is based on how the setting is described in interviews with setting staff (and in the child's statement) compared with the outcome of a context assessment based on a selection of items from the ECERs scale (space and furnishings and interactions) and the Orchestrating Play and Learning Criterion of the Evolving Inclusive Practices Dimension of the Index for Inclusion (Early Years). As the settings were mostly in a state of flux the descriptions of their nature are likely become out-of-date in a short period of time.

Mandy's Setting 1, the Suburban Sure Start Children's Centre had previously special provision, "a little family nursery ...just [for] families with children with special needs" (interview). In the transition to become a Sure Start Children's Centre and one of the local authority's specially resourced inclusive settings, it had undergone a lot of staff changes (with temporary contracts and under-staffing) and had moved to a new building attached to a primary school (in January 2006). It provides wrap-around care as well as the foundation stage curriculum and the early learning goals or Birth to 3 Matters. Staff work in shifts "so you don't necessarily always see your key worker when you're in and the parents don't always see the same person at the beginning of the session as at the end of the session depending on the sessions" (interview). Staff said of the Centre that they regarded themselves as inclusive "because we look at the individual child and what their needs are and meet those, rather than whether a child's got a special need or an extra need it's just that you meet the needs of the child whatever they are (.) and the family". However, the peer group are predominantly (three-quarters) children with significant special educational needs and evidence of special equipment and therapists dominate the feel of the place.

Mandy's Setting 2, the Village Playgroup is much more straightforward in its history and nature. It began as now, "started by parents in the village [26 years ago] as a playgroup". It was "part of the PPA and [has] progressed onwards" (interview). It occasionally has children with special educational needs as and when they come along but the peer group is almost exclusively typically developing children. In interview the manager said they would define themselves as inclusive because "our policy says that we should be inclusive and we need to provide opportunities for all children it's a statutory requirement". The context assessment indicated extensive inclusive practice.

Helen's Setting 1 the Opportunity Group, opened as new playgroup in 1971, it's current leaflet recollecting, "this was no ordinary group, but one that welcomed children with learning difficulties and physical, emotional and behaviour problems - children who at that time were not accepted into normal playgroups" and proclaiming that it "continues to provide specialist play facilities for those very special children, and when able, their siblings". Thus, this setting celebrates its special nature and, despite being largely staffed by volunteers, it has good links with specialists (speech and language therapist, physiotherapist, sensory impairment advisors etc). The peers is almost exclusively children with significant special educational needs with the exception of the occasional sibling.

Helen's Setting 2 is an infant school with two specially resourced classrooms for children with severe and complex needs. H attends one of these, the assessment unit, with an additional 1:1 supporter. The special classrooms began as special school in 1982 but evolved to become more inclusive and part of the ordinary school. They acknowledge their ambivalent status, the classteacher seeing her class as "a special setting that can lead to inclusion and offers opportunities for inclusion", noting also that "children in the specially resourced classrooms share the same curriculum topics as other children of the same age". The immediate peer group is almost exclusively children with significant special

educational needs, but there is some access to typically developing children in assemblies and celebrations.

Jamie's Setting 1 is a playgroup that has been operating for over fifteen years. Seven years ago they had put forward a case and applied to become an inclusive setting and were selected. They are one of the authority's special inclusive settings; when asked how they would define themselves the manager explained that they are known as an inclusive setting. The playgroup offers a structured approach and some language specialism and so attracts lots of non-local children. Peers are a mixed group with the setting registered to take up to 26 children, and registered and funded to take eight children with special educational needs (with staffing ratios of 1:2) and more attending without additional resource. An approach of special programmes and withdrawal for special input is operated.

Jamie's Setting 2 is a relatively recent (3 years old) Sure Start session for fathers and their children. It is universal provision with no specific allocated provisions for children with special educational needs. The development worker is very clear about their status "we are inclusive – the whole programme is inclusive" (interview 1). The peer group is predominantly typically developing children (nought to five) with some older siblings. It is in an area of regeneration with high teenage pregnancy rates, but the clientele is described as quite mixed.

The children themselves all have learning and additional difficulties. They are not described further here to allow for the findings of how they are constructed to tell their stories/ paint their pictures.

Data Collection

Detailed case studies were conducted using a visual ethnographic approach. Interviews were conducted with each child's parents and the keyworkers and/or managers in their early years settings. Documents such as Statements of special educational need and home-school books were scrutinised. It is therefore more the public rather than the private (Thomas & Loxley, 2001) constructions of the children that we report and discuss here; the vocabulary used is that deemed palatable for public consumption.

Context measures were carried out based on observations informed by schedules (see above) and documentary evidence gathered. Observations in the field across two separate weeks (one Spring Term, one Summer Term) were conducted generating detailed fieldnotes and X hours of video. Parents kept logs of the pattern of their child's week and added to the video data,

Findings

Mandy

Data allowed analysis of how Mandy is constructed formally and informally and how she is viewed by people in her different settings of home, Suburban Sure Start Children's Centre (SSSCC) and Village Playgroup (VP). The formal description of M on her statement notes her syndrome (Angelmans) and her epilepsy. She is also recorded as being a "happy, contented little girl". Her statement is informed and supported by a lengthy parental input, and statement from the settings, physiotherapist, occupational therapist, Portage worker and educational psychologist. Reference is made to her delayed development, particularly gross and fine motor development and her communication abilities. The statement is the only place where she is portrayed as inconsistent - much of her performance "depending on her health, mood and level of tiredness". Corroborated across the different descriptions of Mandy is the official picture of her as a child who "loves being with other children", who watches them with interest, and who becomes excited with known adults. Similarly common across all descriptions is reference to her dependence on adult support for most activities and her vulnerability in that she "has no sense of danger". The formal conclusion in the statement is that Mandy is a child who needs specialists and special approaches including "a multi-modal approach to communication", "enhanced staff pupil ratio where staff are skilled and experienced in teaching children with complex learning difficulties" and "assistance from all therapies" alongside her more ordinary needs for "opportunities and support to

promote play and social skills”; a foundation stage curriculum (that is “modified and differentiated”), “opportunities to work in a variety of settings”, and close liaison between school and home.

Mandy is viewed positively by all settings and parties as a happy child; she clearly engenders warm feelings in all who interact with her. Her physiotherapist, in her report for the statement, describes her as “a delightful, happy 4 year old” and her parents report state she is “a very happy and loving child”. The SENCO at the Children’s Centre confirms she “is a happy little girl” (statement) as do the Village Playgroup staff (interview). Some of these positive affirmations relate to her responsiveness, for example, to calling her name (SSSCC) or to events and people around her (VP). They also relate to her readiness to smile - “a delightful little girl who greets everyone with a smile” (Portage -statement) and to show affection - “she will give eye contact and hugs” (OT - statement). Indeed this seems to be at the essence of all constructions of M. Summing her up, the Children’s Centre staff describe her as, “a very happy, affectionate little girl”; asked her most striking quality the Village Playgroup staff indicated “she’s affectionate” and her parents, “she’s loving”. Her parents stress her affection over and again in their statement: “she loves playing, cuddling and snuggling in for cuddles”; “she pulls you in very close, unfortunately mostly by tugging your hair”; she “can be very affectionate and rough with her sister and other children”; she “can be over affectionate... wants cuddles a lot and enjoys pulling hair”; she is “a very happy and loving child”; she “enjoys playing one to one and having cuddles”.

Similarly, there is a common construction of M as a sociable child, loving being with other children, watching them with interest (statement). Social interaction is a strength identified by Mandy’s parents who note in their statement that she “craves social interaction”, “interacts well in a group situation” and “is good at social interaction with adults”. The professionals working with her note her recognition of known adults evident in “beaming smiles and excited body movements” (EP -statement), which are confirmed by both settings where staff also note her developing relationships with them: “she does enjoy the social bits of being here and she’s making good relationships with staff” (SSSCC interview); “shows recognition of key adults in setting” (statement). Her enjoyment of other children is reported by all, but the Village Playgroup are less tentative about this, observing that “there are certain children who she’ll aim to go for like to cuddle” (interview), compared with the Children’s Centre who are more cautious, noting in interview that “she moves her head to where the children are (.) she is aware of them (.) I don’t know that she’d actually go up and want to play with them but she’s happy for them to come and play next to her” and on her statement that “Mandy’s interaction with other children is limited at the nursery”. Her relationship with her sister is undisputed, however, and her parents add that “she’s great with her cousins” and that “she is pretty happy and pretty social with most people” (interview). All accounts of Mandy also refer to her excitability, particularly when she sees family, typified by the observation by her mother in interview that Mandy “just goes ballistic” when her husband’s mother comes to visit, “she gets so excited she loves her to bits”.

A further common construction is of Mandy as child who is interested in people and things. The official account of her in her statement records her interest in watching children and picking up information from doing so, her speech and language therapist adding that she “studies faces and new objects with concentration” and her Portage worker that she “explores her environment well”. The Children’s Centre sum Mandy up as “a keen explorer” and in interview her Village Playgroup keyworkers volunteer her most striking quality as being that she is “very observant”. Written and oral accounts from home and both settings make numerous references to her liking to explore her environment, exploring toys and materials, listening to, feeling and mouthing things, experimenting with cause and effect toys, crawling towards and reaching for things that interest her, enjoying music, sensory things and looking at books. More than just interested, Mandy is also defined by all parties as determined. Again, Village Playgroup keyworkers see the quality of being “strong-minded” as a most striking feature of her, giving examples of her “going round whatever way she could” to get to something of interest, and Children’s Centre staff said in interview “she’s so determined”. Her parents describe how determined she can be to keep hold of some things: “it’s like a real tug of war to get it to get it back off her again”; “she’ll turn her back on them and try and shield the toy from them - ‘this is mine’ you know”. Similarly, they recount in interview, “she’s quite definite with her choices and she’ll either just ignore them both because she doesn’t want any of them or she’ll be grabbing out for what she wants”.

Mandy’s strong spirit is also largely accepted as a demonstration of ordinary naughtiness, particularly in her parents’ eyes. They note she “enjoys pulling hair” and that “she can also bite when frustrated with something and when she is over excited”, and they explain, “We try sitting her on a ‘naughty step’

to let her know she has done something wrong” (statement). In interview they talk of the development of a “real (.) cry (.) a real tantrummy cry”, if something is taken off her. The settings are more neutral in their accounts: “she can pull hair when adults are in close proximity but this can be when she is frustrated at the adult stopping her from doing something that she likes. She can also bite” (SSSCC statement) and she needs two adults to “stop her placing her hands or the materials in her mouth as she is very strong” (VP statement).

There are interesting common constructions of Mandy as a mixture of independent, dependent and vulnerable. Her independence is noted by her parents as enjoying freedom and playing on her own. In the early years settings there is celebration of her independent movement to access toys she wants. Her dependence in contrast is laboured in her statement and in all descriptions of her. For the pediatrician and the Children’s Centre M is defined as “*fully* dependent on her parents for dressing, toileting and feeding” and “*totally* dependent on adults for her dressing, feeding and toileting skills” respectively (my italics). The pervasiveness of her need for support is stressed by the EP who describes her as “dependent on adult’s support for most activities” and by the Children’s Centre staff who see her as “dependent on adult support for most of her activities and experiences”, needing “adult support for all her needs” (SENCO - statement) and “dependent on an adult for all of her needs basically” (interview). Village Playgroup staff and her parents tend to stress what she can do with adult support, for example, needing “support for standing” (VP statement), needing 1:1 for art and support for sitting and walking (VP interview), and “using adult support Mandy can walk a few steps” (parents). They emphasise her need for “hand-over-hand support” and “one to one attention”, while the Children’s Centre stress adult encouragement and supervision. Mandy is universally seen as vulnerable, her formal statement, her parents’ statement and the Children’s Centre SENCO all refer to her as having “no sense of danger”. All parties highlight her vulnerability to hurting herself, e.g. from choking when mouthing on small objects (SSSCC, VP, Portage) or falling (physiotherapist, parents).

Lastly, in terms of common constructions of Mandy, she is held as someone who is making progress, but who needs access to specialists in order to continue to do so. Improvements are noted in her attention (SLT -statement), her crawling and climbing (parents, SSSCC), her exploratory play (parents, VP), her coping (VP) and her communication (parents, VP). However her statement stresses her “complex needs requiring assistance from all therapies”, the need for “a multi-modal approach to communication” and “enhanced staff pupil ratio where staff are skilled and experienced in teaching children with complex learning difficulties”. Similarly, Mandy’s parents stress her need for “a lot of contact with these therapists” (physio, OT and speech therapy), endorsed by the early years settings.

In many ways, then, Mandy is constructed in very similar ways in these formal and informal accounts and in the different settings in which she finds herself. Only a small number of idiosyncratic constructions are to be found. The statement by the physiotherapist claims she is “characteristically hyperactive”, but no other reference is made to this, although she is defined as a “poor sleeper” (SSSCC) with night waking problems (OT) and difficult sleep routines (Portage).

There are occasional differences in the way Mandy is constructed by her parents and the two early years settings. Her parents construe Mandy as someone who is struggling: she “has trouble with the coordination”; Makaton is difficult for her to learn due to coordination; she “struggles with releasing objects... also struggles with stacking tasks” (statement). This notion of her struggling is disguised elsewhere in everyone’s positive messages about her determination and progress or in the less positive messages about needing support. Yet is only in these parental descriptions of Mandy struggling that we might imagine what is like to be her – there is something very empathetic in this unique construction. Both settings focus on features of Mandy that her parents do not. Firstly, Mandy is positively constructed as a compliant little girl: “she’s very amenable”; “quite compliant really” ; “she’s quite compliant with them [splints] until they hurt” (SSSCC interview); and she “tolerates guidance from main carer”, “accepts adult help” (statement) and “adapts to her environment” (interview). Thus, we see from the point of view of professionals working with Mandy in an early years setting that she is easy to accommodate. She may need a lot of adult support and supervision, and she may occasionally pull hair, but essentially she is not difficult. Secondly, related to her compliance, an identity for Mandy that is celebrated in the early years settings is that she is not a complainer or whinger. Village Playgroup staff in interview explain, “anything can be going on and she’ll just blend and fit in whereas some children might get a bit stroppy”. Similarly, Children’s Centre staff note that she doesn’t cry over little things, only when something’s really wrong - “she’s quite a tough little cookie really” who “takes quite a lot”. Again, from a setting’s perspective this makes her an ideal pupil.

There are also two discrepancies between the constructions of M by the Village Playgroup and Children's Centre. Early in their report for her statement, Village Playgroup state that Mandy "has become part of the group". This is a positive affirmation of her belonging and rightful place among her mainstream peer group. No such sense of group belonging emerges from the data from the Children's Centre, either explicitly or implicitly. Village Playgroup is also unusual in never referring to M as delayed. Delay in her gross and fine motor development and in her language is prominent in her statement. It is stressed in her parents' account for her statement ("all the normal developmental targets have taken a lot of time and effort to attain" and "progress is slow compared to her peers. Her overall development is considerably delayed... Physically and mentally she is considerably behind."). Delay defines Mandy for the Children's Centre: she is a "little girl with developmental delay"; four other references to delay are made in their report for the statement. However, no mention of the delay is made by Village Playgroup, where she is welcomed as just a little girl as individual as all the others. In summary, the common, shared and idiosyncratic constructions of M are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Constructions of Mandy

Construction	home	SSSCC	VP
happy			
social			
affectionate			
interested			
determined			
independent			
highly dependent			
vulnerable			
making progress			
naughty			
struggling			
compliant			
not a complainer			
part of the group			
delayed			

Helen

In contrast to Mandy, Helen is constructed more variably in her different settings. There are some common identities given to her across her different environments, but there are more differences. Her statement defines her as "diagnosed as having epilepsy, developmental delay and a possible autistic spectrum disorder"; she is described as appearing older than her chronological age and with delayed gross and fine motor skills, self-help skills and expressive and receptive language. She is said to display "a number of behaviours that suggest she may have an autistic spectrum disorder": "she tends to jump up and down when excited and flaps her hands; she loves wheels which she enjoys spinning; she has a favourite t-shirt which she wants to wear all the time. H bangs her head against objects and people when she is frustrated, when she cannot have what she wants or, to gain or share adult attention." At home, and in her two early years settings, some of the interactions and interventions appear to be informed by this understanding of her as delayed and possibly autistic but other constructions of her dominate.

The two EY settings, a Distant Smalltown Infant School (DSIS) and a Local Smalltown Opportunity Group (LSOG) share a common perception of Helen as someone needing high levels of supervision. For the Infant School classteacher, "she's unmanageable without adult 1:1" (interview) and has to play in a fenced off area, the use of which depends not "on how they are or if there's been *unacceptable behaviour*, we use it for *children who need a higher level of supervision*". Opportunity Group keyworkers labour the need for supervision even more, explaining in interview, "Helen does require the minimum of a 1:1 keyworker at all times but 2:1 is far more effective when playing due to Helen's stature and the vulnerability of the other children in the group. H is a physically strong girl of above average size for her age which increases the level of good supervision she requires." The supervision

requirements relate to keeping H safe from falling (“a second helper is always by the slide to assist her”) and others safe from her head butting (e.g. “she headbangs and she’ll just go up behind another child and headbang and very quick so you’re always aware of how close she is to another child or adult if she’s higher than the adult”, “we’ll sit and do a very simple form board (.) with a helper on each side of course to guard her so she’s not with other children in a group”; “she’s strong and then she needs two people to guide her”; “and sometimes you have to stop her so you do really need two people all the time”; “we don’t leave her to wander round”; “our main concern at going home time is headbutting because there are so many children around it’s a vulnerable time”). Connected to the need for supervision is a common conception across the two EY settings, that H is someone you need to outwit. This is subtle at the Opportunity Group, put in terms of “members of staff need to be fully aware that Helen may head butt other children, furniture or the floor, and that it happens very quickly” and that they are “getting quite tough”. The Infant School are more explicit: “you have to be three steps ahead of her”.

The settings also share some more positive perceptions of Helen – as interested, happy and making progress. Her Infant School classteacher sees interest in other children beginning as she imitates their gross motor play, watches chase games and follows at a distance. She “doesn’t communicate with other children although she does look at them when she is relaxed and happy” and “if she notices differences in people in the way they are compared to how they usually appear that can make her laugh, or if other children laugh she’ll be interested”. Interviews at the Opportunity Group similarly find her described as interested in others but from a distance, “fascinated by people and people’s faces and glasses”, “she likes people around her”, “she likes other people around her but she doesn’t socialize with other children”.

In terms of being happy, only the Opportunity Group get near to seeing this as a defining quality, describing her in their report as “a little girl who is usually happy and enthusiastic”, confirming in interview that “on the whole she’s a happy child”, “a very smiley child”. At the Infant School this is a softer construction in which references are made to the way she “laughs a lot”, has “a sense of humour” (her 1:1 supporter) and in her home-school book, she is reported as “much happier than last week”, “came in happily”, has been “generally happy” etc. Also more tentative, at home her mother acknowledges the happy quality in a qualified way, “she’s quite happy but...”, going on to talk more about her difficulties.

Progress is not a feature dwelt on at home but the Opportunity Group clearly define Helen as someone who is making progress, her report notes “she has learned to climb down the steps with her key worker”; “she will now allow an apron to be put on and taken off”, and “as each new phase of learning and achievement is reached, working with Helen is very rewarding”. In interview it is evident that progress keeps staff going, “when she first started it was difficult to persuade her to do anything I thought of (.) it was very difficult to persuade her to do anything other than just follow her round the room (.) and to a certain extent that can still be the case (.) but the photographs help because now we can show her a photograph of washing hands and she’ll almost walk towards it”, “she used to trip up when walking but she doesn’t trip up much now”, “she’s beginning to get words and will say ‘more’ if we say ‘more more’”; “most of her speech is repetition but once (recently) she said ‘nice’ not as repetition but it was verbalising her feelings which was brilliant”; “headbutting has got a lot better from when she first came back to us in September”. Similarly, the Infant School celebrate that H is “starting to put two words together”, initiating, using Makaton, saying Good Morning and ‘sit down’, leading staff to things, more likely to share interest and less likely to need her helmet for head butting. This is largely put down to staffing: “she’s been much better since she’s had 1:1”, “I’ve noticed progress particularly since she’s had 1:1 adult attention”. Inherent in the construction of progress is the construction of Helen as someone who is becoming more compliant - there are undertones of battles and staff winning them (“we can make her say ‘thank you’ and ‘goodbye’”, LSOG interview).

Helen is constructed at her Infant School as an aggressive child. The classteacher in interview observes, “she can be aggressive”, “she’ll head butt other children if [her 1:1 supporter] pays attention to them rather than to her”, and her 1:1 supporter explains, “she head butts and she has started to use her fists to hit”, “she has hit me and it was hard”. The word aggression is used again when she notes that, “her aggression towards other children has decreased”. Her mother uses this vocabulary too in the home-school book, saying she is “just worried about her getting a bit aggressive when near your face. She sometimes whacks you round the face. Whatever next?!” Helen is constructed at home and in Infant School as somehow unreasonable. Her mother puzzles, “she’s got a switch in her (.) within an instant

she can be going off on one in temper and she can suddenly start (.) well she headbangs all the time"; "there's the odd ones that we just don't know why she does she can be happy sat there playing with you or just pottering around on her own and then she'll just go up to something (.) and whack it bad". Similarly, her classteacher focuses on the lack of logic to her behaviour, "she's very unpredictable, and when she's distressed, she's very distressed", "She'll scream, cry, bang her head forwards or backwards on objects, walls, floor, furniture and people, and she'll do that for three-quarters of an hour". Moreover, her 1:1 supporter adds, "and she does self-harm". Notes in her home-school book seem to complain of her unreasonableness: "very demanding today"; "it seems that she is trying to be naughty", "lots of unprovoked head butting". At the Opportunity Group she seems to be constructed more as puzzling, unfathomable, than vexing: "we don't know why she does it because she never pushes another child I've never seen that and she could so we don't know why she does that with her head", "she went through a stage at home where she was rocking on her knees and putting her knees in her eye sockets until she got black eyes and we never knew what that was about but that seems to have gone now"; "it's difficult to know [what she's communicating about]".

At home and at Infant School, H is clearly conceived as a problem to others. Her mother worries that "headbanging is everywhere and that is a big issue", because she is "doing it with other children as well (.) it's generally children who are smaller than her but also adults if an adult was to be leaning down in front of her then she'd usually get them as well". Her classteacher recounts, "sometimes we've had to ring Mum because it's distressing for everyone else in the classroom". There are hints at the blame lying with Helen for the problems she poses, "she's not aware of others' needs and is emotionally dependent on adults"; "she does things to get attention like she'll pull an electric cable and look at you or she'll head butt to get attention". Moreover, she is portrayed as someone to be feared, "all the children here are very wary of her and avoid her... because they've been hurt by her or they've seen the consequences of that ... some children are terrified of her". At the Opportunity Group, in contrast, she is more seen as a challenge and a responsibility: "they do bring a helmet which we've never used because we reckon that with our help we can watch her but the time she succeeded here was when we came out of the playroom and we're at the handover and there are too many people around (...) this has only happened two or three times but it's upsetting for everyone (.) we are thinking about handing over in the room so it's clear who is responsible in the hall (...)"; "we don't use it (helmet) with two of us looking after her I don't think it's necessary"; "we need to be told from someone who's professional what the right approach is to this [head butting] we need to know" (interview).

Just as there are constructions of Helen shared between her home setting and Infant School, there are constructions shared between home and Opportunity Group. Both view her as unconnected in a social sense, her LSOG keyworkers explain in interview, "I don't think there is strictly a relationship" (with staff), "if different people did the same things with her I don't think it would make any difference", "I can't think of a single time when she was angry or pleased with others", "she props herself [up on us] sometimes but I think that's more to do with being physically tired or needing support (.) it's not a loving cuddle or even a fun cuddle ... you don't get that with Helen (...)", "she doesn't notice separating from mum". They do, however, acknowledge in contrast that, "she knows mum of course and gets very excited when dad comes". Her mother says of her interactions with same-age peers, "she's not really into that social playing side they do tend to exclude her". However, her mother is also aware that Helen can connect and does not see her as socially adrift: "she's close to her grandparents all four of them", "she recognises them all and she's excited to see them when they come here", "she knows her cousins and she'll sit and she'll reel off all their names now", "there's a couple we know she's always talking about them and always saying their names and gets really excited to see them because they pay a lot of attention to her (.) they haven't got kids". This latter conception of the socially connected H is not one either of her EY settings strongly shares, though the Opportunity Group is more ambivalent.

In addition to Helen's mother seeing her as both unconnected and connected, she sees her as both focused and unfocused. In one part of the interview she describes H thus: "when she's focussed on something that really gets her attention and then she'll sit there for quite a while (.) if she's into a good book then she'll sit for a while", whereas later she describes another side to Helen: "she's not one for sitting down for very long", "she'll change her mind every few minutes we can go through 50 million toys". This may be where families get to see more of the different sides to young children and where H is a complex little girl. Her mother also has constructions of H as at times, "really chatty" (home-school book), "sometimes a bit clingy when we separate but nothing major", manipulative ("she knows she gets a reaction from that so rather than her trying to think about what she wants to say she's probably like 'oh if I headbang I'll get a reaction quicker' (.) and then as soon as she headbangs we'll comfort her

and say 'what do you want?' and so she knows it goes that way”), like usual children (“sometimes if she doesn't get her own way then she'll stamp her feet and the usual child paddy but then she'll start headbanging”, “quite determined (.) if she's trying to do something she will persevere for quite a while”, and developmentally young (“that's one very young thing about her that a lot of things still go in her mouth”).

Opportunity Group staff have various constructions of their own too. For them Helen is a “bit of a routine girl”, competent ““I think she's a lot more able than her communication allows her to be, she understands and is able to do matching and sorting”, “and she's good at colours she won't put a yellow soldier in a blue hole”, responsive to music which excites her and to familiar songs and rhymes which calm her, and physically needy (“my main worry is her physical needs”, “she used to trip up when walking”, “she can't get up very well yet”). Overall, the various constructions of H are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: Constructions of Helen

Construction	home	DSIS	LSOG
needing supervision			
needing to be outwitted			
interested			
happy			
making progress			
becoming more compliant			
aggressive			
unreasonable			
problem to others			
a responsibility			
unconnected			
connected			
unfocussed			
focussed			
like usual children			
quite determined			
developmentally young			
a routine girl			
competent			
physically needy			

Jamie

Construction of Jamie indicate that he presents in a similar way to his family and to his 2 preschool settings, a Special Inclusive Playgroup (SIP) and a Sure Start Dad's Club (SSDC) provision. For all of them Jamie is primarily someone who is exceptionally close to his family. His mother explains, “We're lucky to have him. I think that's why we're so close. We are a very close family us three”; “he knows daddy's got bad eyes, and he'll do what he can to help daddy, just as [his dad] will do what he can to help Jamie. It gives a little bit of confidence to help each other. It's made them bond that bit more” (mother interview 1). Both early years settings described Jamie's concern about his daddy and mummy when he first arrived, Playgroup staff talking in interview about him continuing to talk mostly about his daddy, and that he “can't wait to see him”, and Dad's Club staff explaining, “when he first started he was very very clingy to his dad”; “he used to hide under his hat and not even look at you... and cling around his dad's legs”; “sometimes he would stand and say ‘where's daddy?’” “I think they've got quite a special bond” (interview 1).

Despite this clinginess, there is universal construction of Jamie as sociable. His mother describes him as enjoying company of other children, he “loves going on the bus” and he is close to his grandparents, cousins, aunts and uncles, local friends who he has met through Dad's Club. His father emphasizes the bond he has with his preschool keyworker, “loves him, absolutely loves him” (interview 1). Similarly,

the Playgroup recognise these qualities, telling us that Jamie “loves being with his friends”, “knows all our names”, and has a good relationship with his keyworker, other adults, his cousin and some close friends. When asked about his strengths, the response was, “He’s friendly. He’s sociable” (interview 1). Dad’s Club staff observed that he watches and copies other children and that “he is actually trying to play with them and not just alongside them” (interview 1).

Being sociable is in some ways a new way of seeing Jamie. For all parties, he is someone who is making progress, growing in sociability and confidence. His parents see him as a little boy whose “speech and language have come on a lot ... saying more words, speaking a lot clearer”, who is “doing more for himself” and interacting with other kids more (interview 1). Playgroup staff stressed in their first interview that, “He’s made so much progress from when he first started”, specifically his sociability had improved which was their first target. In their second interview they reported that he had improved friendships and relationships with other children, that he moved around more and joined in more with other children’s play, had improved role play, greater independence and that his communication had improved significantly. Similarly, Dad’s Club staff told us, “he’s come out such a lot”, “it has built up his confidence a lot”, “there has been a difference in him... he used to hide under his hat and not even look at you... and cling around his dad’s legs”, but he is starting to explore more different activities, learning what he can do (interview 1).

In the context of Jamie’s rapid development there were common constructions of him as a competent little boy. His mother spoke proudly of him helping his dad, and his dad was observed as saying to him, “You’re so clever. Don’t get big-headed!”, celebrating his competence with jigsaw puzzles (fieldnote). Closely in keeping with this, the Playgroup noted how he helps his dad, (interview 1) and a staff member was observed to say to one of his peers, “J will help you. I can do puzzles” (fieldnote). In the second interview staff commented on Jamie’s ability to carry out tasks fairly independently, his knowledge of concepts other four-year-olds struggle with, him being “almost to the level of his peers now in being able to understand the purpose of what he is doing and being able to carry it out”. In everyday tasks, however, it is at home and at Dad’s Club where he is mostly constructed as competent; video shows him helping himself to snacks, eating at the table, laying the table, washing his hands when needed. At his Playgroup, in contrast, he is seen as needing adult supervision while eating and help with hand-washing.

Some of the constructions of Jamie evident in the data from the early years settings may have been taken for granted by his parents. Like M and H he is constructed as a happy child. Playgroup staff spoke of him as “always happy... always comes in smiling ... always bubbly” (interview 1), and Dad’s Club staff reflected, “I think he’s very content with being here and playing. He’s very happy to go round and to try different things”; “he just seems a happy content child who’s happy with whatever is there” (interview 1). Linked to his smiley disposition perhaps, was the construction of Jamie as “a lovely little lad, quite happy and content” (SSDC, interview 1). For the Playgroup, there is an even stronger construction of him as endearing. For them this is linked with how he connects with them, using touch to make contact, it being “endearing to have this little hand on an arm or leg to attract attention”. In the second interview they describe him putting his arms folded on the desk and leaning his head very close to the adult, almost touching, which is again – “very endearing”. His parents are less effusive about any endearing quality, his mother constructing him more as “not a bad little boy”, who “wasn’t too bad as a baby”. However, their interactions with him demonstrate a loving, deeply respectful relationship and a deep interest in their son. There is also a playfulness in their construction of him, with many of their interactions having a teasing quality, partly in interaction with J’s teasing approach to them (fieldnotes).

There are some constructions of Jamie that are not shared. For the Playgroup owner, he is a vulnerable child: “My big concern for him [transferring to school] is his vulnerability. He’s so tiny. He needs familiar adults to be able to communicate. He also needs familiar children. He needs someone looking out for him. He’s tiny compared to other four and five year olds.” (interview 2). Dad’s Club never describe him in this way; the closest they get is in describing him as quiet, “he is quiet”; “He’s very quiet. I don’t think he shows his emotions that much” (interview 1). The nearest his parents get is saying, “he gets tired, not like other children, he gets tired and then he gets clumsy” (interview 1).

Linked to vulnerability, but also distinct is the construction of J as a little boy who is disadvantaged. For the Playgroup he is disadvantaged by some of his family circumstances in that he is not always encouraged to be independent with self-help at home (interview 1) and in that deterioration in his dad’s

eyesight has an impact on him - on their independent travel together and on his dad being able to get to school in the event of a toileting accident. He is also seen as disadvantaged by the system as he is not disabled enough to get financial help with transition to school, and by his physical self in that his facial features might attract negative comments from new peers at school (interview 2). While Dad's Club do not construct Jamie in this way (perhaps as many of their children have social disadvantages it is the norm), there are resonances in J's parents' accounts. His mother talks in terms of, "There's been so much in his life that's been wrong" (interview 1) and they see themselves as a family where things have not always been easy (his father's residential special school was harsh, neither of them are in paid employment, they have experienced a series of miscarriages). Mostly, the disadvantage is in the physical challenges that J faces. They list his impairments/medical problems: cleft palate and lip, broncho-oculo facial syndrome, speech and language delay, endocarditis, microcephaly, short stature, deafness (glue ear), gross motor delay. They were told at his birth that he was brain dead. He is also therefore constructed by them as a survivor, who gets poorly, but a little boy they are lucky to have – a prize in some way. Constructions of Jamie are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3: Constructions of Jamie:

Construction	home	SIP	SSDC
close to family			
sociable			
making progress			
competent			
happy			
lovely			
endearing			
not a bad little boy			
vulnerable			
quiet			
disadvantaged			
prize			

Discussion

In setting out to answer a research question about how young children with learning difficulties are differently constructed in their different environment of home, special and inclusive preschool we had made several assumptions. These assumptions included the ontological, taking a social constructivist, or at least critical realist approach, that there were social constructions of the children, operating separate to, or in interaction with, the children's real selves. There was a methodological assumption that these constructions would reveal themselves in the data; that they could be 'got at'. Plus, there was the assumption that there would indeed be differences to be seen. Previous studies indicate that how children are understood depends on the complex interactions with other children and staff, who may or not see them as special, deserving of support and so on (e.g. Allan, 2002).

Starting with interview data, written data and fieldnotes, and using an inductive coding process, it has been possible to isolate various constructions of the children. These are sometimes defining, though they can be more subtly encapsulated within a series of descriptions. The different constructions can also be quite distinct, such as Helen being an aggressor to be tamed and outwitted, or the distinctions can be more nebulous, such as between Jamie vulnerable or quiet or a child who gets tired. An interesting dimension emerging from the data is that there are several occasions in which the children as constructed as a mixture of polar opposites: Mandy is viewed as both dependent and independent, and H is viewed as vulnerable and a danger to others, focused and unfocused, connected and unconnected. These conundrums indicate a willingness to see the complexities of the children as opposed to reducing them to a few basic, unproblematic defining qualities.

Acknowledging the difficulties and limitations in comparing the three case studies, some notions are worth exploring. Mandy is the child for whom the constructions across the three environments are most in keeping. She is also a child who is small, smiley and who does not present too much challenge to the people interacting with her. It is therefore easy for positive constructions of Mandy to be shared. However, Jamie is also a small, smiley, unchallenging child, but there are more variations in how he is

constructed. The differences here can be readily understood as being about the children's networks as opposed to the responses to their own characteristics. Mandy has very proactive parents who have good networks of support; they drive a process in which communication occurs across all Mandy's environments. Jamie's parents have far fewer resources (social or financial capital), they are more passive receivers of the support networks put in place for them by professionals. Shared communications in both cases stem from a primary carer taking the child to and from their early years settings, but Mandy's mother's communications are more in keeping with the language of school than those of Jamie's father. Constructions of Helen are most varied; she is less automatically likeable because she poses more challenge. Therefore how staff construct her depends partly on the resources they have at their disposal. The Opportunity Group have a higher staffing ratio and also less demands on what they are expected to achieve with Helen. It is therefore easier for them to have their more positive take on what she presents to them. This is not to deny the agency of the staff; they are kind volunteers wanting to give the children the support to develop. There is least communication between Helen's environments, with no communication at all between the two early years settings and only a home-school book between the Distant Infant School and H's family.

It would be a gross over-simplification to see in the data a pattern of the special environments seeing the children as special and the inclusive environments seeing them as ordinary. (It would even be a gross over-simplification to see the settings as either special or inclusive, though one might expect the legacies of special educational discourses to be in evidence (Skrtic, 1991)). Nonetheless, it was only the Village Playgroup, which scored highly in the context assessments using the Index for Inclusion that constructed their child with special needs as 'part of the group'.

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